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ABSTRACT

Over 150 teachers from five western-central states completed questionnaires on their experiences with individualized reading (IR). Most of the respondents were familiar with IR and had used it at least limitedly in their classrooms. They praised IR's advantages as generating greater student interest, allowing for self-paced progress, and encouraging personal student-teacher relationships. However, they felt that, when IR was used exclusively, basic reading skills were neglected. In actual practice, IR has probably been absorbed into total reading programs, has had an influence on the selection and uses of materials in the classroom, and has made teachers more aware of pupil differences. The future of IR probably lies in its ability to pressure schools to encounter individual differences and resolve them with the reading program. (JB)

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Teachers Surveyed: A Decade of Individualized Reading

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What is the present status of the individualized reading movement? Is it being used widely? Have the advantages as advocated by its promoters become self-evident? If not, what problems have teachers experienced which have caused them to give it up or why has it not spread to other schools and teachers?

Individualized reading as an identifiable teaching plan or as an organized movement probably had, if not its birth, its early childhood in the 1950's. Lila Banton Smith in her review of reading for the past fifty years cites this period for its beginning. Numerous articles about it began appearing near the end of the period. In a survey of *Elementary English* articles it was found that during the following even years the number of articles on I.R. was as follows: 1956, one; 1958, five; 1960, six; 1962, seven; 1964, two; 1966, three; and so far in 1968 no articles have appeared in the first four issues. The interest as evidenced by the literature peaked in the early 1960's, and currently few articles are being accepted.

What does this mean? Have teachers learned how to use it and now it is taken for granted, or has the movement died out without having had much influence?

In an effort to answer some of these questions the author of this article conducted a limited questionnaire survey of nearly 200 teachers spread over five western-central states: Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, and Missouri. Slightly over 150 questionnaires were returned and tabulated, the majority of them from Kansas. While this poll had most of the weaknesses of such research it is believed that the following results might be quite representative of teachers' experiences with and reactions to I.R. today. There were five sections to the instrument: Section I, a survey of how widely the plan is being used; Section II, for those who were using it; Section III, for those who had tried it and had abandoned it· Section IV, those who had never used it; and Section V, questions pertaining to the influence and trends of I.R.

The first problem was one of definition. Although the usual description of I.R. was given at the beginning of the questionnaire, in reading the comments the writer found that many teachers considered individualized reading laboratories of materials or programmed material to be the individualized approach about which I was asking while in reality these materials only meet the self-pacing criteria of the I.R. approach. It may have been that they were too eager to identify affirmatively with the questionnaire and to be "up-to-date" in their reading methods. A later question indicated that many of them did not really use the approach completely, if at all.

In reply to the question, "Do you feel that you are familiar with the I.R. approach to the teaching of reading?", forty per cent said yes; forty-eight per cent said somewhat; and eleven per cent said no. The second question was, "If your answer

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was yes how did you learn about it?" The replies were: through workshops—thirty-three, college classes—thirty-three, administration—thirteen, personal study—seventy, fellow teachers—thirty-eight. The third question was, "If you have used it, are you still using it regularly or at least part of the year?" and the replies were: yes, eighty-six per cent; no fourteen per cent. Not all teachers chose to answer this question, an indication that some type of a compromise question probably was needed. The validity of these figures has already been questioned. The writer's observation of actual classrooms in this part of the country and the comments which teachers make would indicate that only a small percentage actually use the complete plan for a major part of the year.

The next section asked the teachers who were using it to list its chief advantages. Forty mentioned that the child can proceed at his own pace, which may give an indication of the type of program they had used. A much smaller number, twenty-one, believed it created greater reading interest. Sixteen mentioned that individual differences can be more effectively met, and five listed better pupil-teacher relationships.

One of the common criticisms of the plan is that basic reading skills are difficult to teach or may be neglected. In reply to such a question, thirty-one said both individual and group work were needed; fifteen said they presented them to a group and reinforced them individually; fifteen were able to teach them individually; and eleven depended upon group instruction. The conclusion might be drawn from this that many of the people compromised especially in this area and still depended upon some group work. This, of course, is what the critics said would be necessary at the beginning of the movement.

Twenty four respondents believed that all teachers are capable of using I.R. if they have initiative; seventeen if they had had specialized training; and five if they had adequate time to use it.

Most teachers agreed that the pupil's reaction was highly favorable or favorable to the plan and some mentioned that it fostered self-respect and a sense of security upon the slow reader's part. These results would agree with a commonly stated advantage of I.R.

Again a commonly listed advantage, the individual conference, was found to be looked upon favorably by the teachers who had used the plan. Fourteen listed that children like the individual attention, twelve that it helps the teacher to understand the child, and eight that it created better pupil-teacher relations. A few added the comment that the time element was especially critical in this phase of the program.

Few had made any effort to objectively measure the results. One questionnaire reported a short study which showed that boys made the greatest gain and all seemed to gain in enthusiasm and joy of reading. Another study showed that out of twenty-five second graders last year, eleven, or forty per cent, went above 4.0 in paragraph reading. This year with a longer period in I.R. out of twenty-eight pupils, seventeen, or sixty per cent, went above 4.0. It might be pointed out that until we have better instruments to measure some of the features of the approach it is probably best to depend upon teachers' experiences for our evidence. They do have some validity for everyday classroom practices. This does not excuse classroom teachers, however, from trying to do more in the way of action research with I.R.

In the next section the final question was "Have you found any of the following seriously handicapped or limited your use of I.R.?" (These are reported in raw scores, not per cents.)

	yes	no
large class sizes	49	18
attitude of administration	12	30
lack of materials	42	19
lack of training	48	15
attitudes of children	3	40
attitudes of parents	7	38
lack of sufficient time	53	15
weakness in method	22	23

Although many teachers may not have used the complete plan the problems they experienced seem to be common to parts of or all of the approach. Probably few would say as one teacher did: "No problems. An ideal way to teach reading."

The writer was especially interested in ascertaining why teachers who had tried the plan had abandoned it. Few articles of this nature have been published. A much smaller sample was available in this section. In reply to, "Why did you quit using I.R.?" A few said because of materials and for lack of time. Several said other new materials had replaced it. Six felt that other teachers under different situations should be encouraged to use it. In reply to the question if there were major errors in the philosophy and practice of I.R. only a few felt the time element was a major error. A number of these respondents intend to use it sometime in the future.

Section IV was for the people who had never tried it. Here a major discrepancy in numbers arose, for many people answered this section who evidently indicated in Section I that they had or were using the plan. Of course, some checked a number of reasons for never having used it. Although the numbers seemingly contradict the first section, something can be learned about the problems of introducing the plan in a school. In reply to the statement: "I have never used it because, (may check more than one)" the following raw scores were noted.

40 I do not know enough about the method.
27 I have never received any instruction in this approach.
10 I do not believe it would be as effective as my present method.
6 I would like to use it, but I do not have time to learn how.
1 My administration does not encourage experimenting.
0 It might cause friction with fellow teachers.
2 It is impractical because of the time it requires.
7 It is not suited to reading instruction in my grade.
27 We lack the necessary materials in our school.
3 I am not the type of person who works best in individual teaching situations.
0 Research studies show the gains it makes are less than other methods.
0 Frankly, the effort needed to try something new is beyond me.

Certainly, the replies here would indicate that colleges need to do more in familiarizing beginning teachers with this approach. Replies further indicate that many experienced teachers lack a basic knowledge of I.R. Materials seem to be the second most crucial hurdle in initiating I.R.

In the final section of the questionnaire, it was interesting to note the teachers' impressions about the future of I.R. In reply to the question: "According to your impression is I.R." (raw scores were tabulated as follows.)

7 on the decline—fewer teachers are using it than were a few years ago and you do not read as much about it.
53 is increasing in popularity.
47 is neither decreasing or increasing in popularity.

In regard to its influence the teachers believe that it:

68 has had a real influence upon the teaching of reading.

22 has had little effect upon the teaching of reading.

It would seem apparent from these totals that I.R. has made an impression upon these teachers. One can only observe, however, that in actual practice it has probably been absorbed into the total reading program as a part of an eclectic plan for part of the year or for part of the reading period. It has had an influence upon materials; it has made teachers more aware of pupil differences; and it has served as a conscience for many teachers in broadening their approach of the single basal series.

Publishers and writers have been sensitive to the trend stimulating them to flood the market with vast amounts of semi-individualized programs. Thousands of library books have been published and administrators have been pressured into creating elementary libraries to satisfy this need to read individually selected materials.

Certainly it is too soon to adequately judge the influence of a decade of I.R., but it can be safely said that it has not swept the country in this time and that probably its future lies in its ability to create pressure upon school people to more adequately take care of individual differences within the present reading program. We know pupils differ and we will no longer be satisfied with a reading program which ignores such differences.

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